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THE NEW POETRY AND DEMOCRACY *

BY JESSIE B. RITTENHOUSE, *New York*

This is the second time this spring that I have had the opportunity to speak directly to book people, people who are intimately in the book realm. The first time was at the Book Sellers' League, held in New York a few weeks ago, and when I looked around, and saw those men who dispense our fate with the public, I thought it was the opportunity of my life to avail myself of Walt Whitman's advice to "celebrate myself." But on the contrary I had to talk about Whitman on that night!

Now you librarians do very much more, to my mind, than the book sellers in democratizing American literature. You have democracy in your hands; you and the schools, going hand in hand, are the two bulwarks of democracy in America, and if we ever get democracy it will be through what the librarians do in conjunction with the schools to bring it to the public. When Miss Plummer wrote to me and said that she wished me to speak on this particular phase of modern poetry I was glad that she named a phase, because overnight there is a new phase in poetry. Poetry is moving so rapidly that you are likely to get up in the morning and find that all the ideas you have had during your lifetime are absolutely exploded.

When people used to ask you to define poetry—you know there are curious people who ask you to define things—you were able to fall back on the three R's—rhyme, rhythm and reason—but now these three R's are knocked from under you. You haven't them any more to fall back upon, and the other day in the subway I heard what I think is as pat a definition of poetry as could well be. Two men were looking over Don Marquis' "Sun Dial." One man said to the other, "Well, how are you going to know any more what is prose and what

is poetry?" and the other man replied, "Why, if the lines go to the edge of the page, it is prose, but if they stop in the middle, it is poetry!"

I thought that was delicious, and right to the point; but the danger of it is that pretty soon they won't stop in the middle! They are not going to make that concession to us very long, because poetry is in a state of revolution. The present movement is like an army with banners, and each insurgent poet has a different brand of revolution. On one of those banners you will find imagism, on another vers libre or free verse, cubism, futurism, and a dozen other things. All of this looks to you very much like chaos. You think: What are they doing? What does it amount to? Has poetry lost its head? It looks that way, but underneath all of these indications of revolution is a law, and that law is that all things grow by revolution, and that every time there is a new expression in poetry that new expression has had to come through tearing down the former tradition. These are the birth pangs of the new movement that is now breaking down the old romanticism. In the twentieth century, you know, we decry Victorianism. We say, "That is so Victorian." We will have nothing to do with it because it is Victorian. In other words we mean that through the whole nineteenth century there persisted the mood of what we call romanticism; and that came in as a reaction to what we now call classicism. Classicism reached its height with Pope, and Dryden, and that formal scholastic, stereotyped phase of poetry which we had in the eighteenth century. We know what Pope's style is: It is like a sentinel on march: the soldier goes back four feet and forward four feet. You just come up standing at the end of the second line.

Romanticism, which was the mood of

*Stenographic report of an extemporaneous address.

the nineteenth century, was the reaction against that dead, formal, crystallized type; it meant the breaking up of this type and putting beauty, and emotion, and sensibility, and imagination back into poetry. The whole mood of romanticism grew out of democracy. It grew through the French Revolution. Just at the time when Coleridge and Wordsworth evolved the beginning of romanticism, they were obsessed by the French Revolution, and all over the world spread democracy. It was like a wave of fire from the French Revolution. Wordsworth went over to France eager to enlist with the revolutionists. Shelley, who was a little younger, was the ideal democrat. It will take probably two or three hundred years to live up to the Shelley ideal. Byron was a democrat, a revolutionist through and through. All these men started as democrats, and the whole movement was radical: it was just as radical as what we are passing through now, but by the law of all of these things, these radical things, after they pass through their cycle—which may be fifty years, or a hundred years (it was about one hundred years in this case); they become conservative and finally effete. What started as radical, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, became conservative and doubtful when it reached Tennyson. Tennyson knew almost nothing of democracy. By the time it came to Matthew Arnold it was scholastic again. It is beautiful poetry, but it is negative. When the movement of romanticism reached Swinburne only the sensuous beauty remained.

It was just as necessary for another revolution to take place after Swinburne, Oscar Wilde and Arthur Symons as it was necessary at Pope's time. It simply had to be done and nature raised up the man—evolved him—and that man was right here in America. It was Walt Whitman! No other man could have taken the place of Walt Whitman at that time. Whitman said, "Everything has been done, the last word has been said in meter and academic form—it has all been said. Now we will have the waves of the sea for our rhythm,

we will have the undulation of the wind over the grass of the prairies, we will have the sighing of the pines, we will have all the natural things back again." Whitman drew his poems from the elements of nature. Romanticism vanished in Walt Whitman, and in its place came democracy.

Now there is all the difference in the world between Walt Whitman's brand of democracy, Edwin Markham's brand, and the brand I am going to speak of. Walt Whitman was what we call an oceanic soul, who received everything—all the streams of life flowed into him and he accepted everything. To him the criminal was as good as the martyr. He said that with every criminal who walked handcuffed, he walked handcuffed. That was splendid, that was the brotherhood idea, the comrade idea, which came in with Whitman. His brand was universality. Everything was good with Whitman. As a matter of fact, everything is not good. Some things are very bad, but in wishing to put humanity first he said, "I am not curious about God; what do I need to know about God? I am at ease about God. Let me know about my fellow men." "I hold nothing as good," he said, "that ignores individuals. The whole American compact is with individuals, and the whole theory of the universe is directed to one individual, namely, to you."

Now, that was splendid. Walt Whitman gave what we call the communal mood. He brought the twentieth century spirit into poetry. He did not particularize; he had social consciousness but not social conscience. You see a difference there? Social conscience comes in when you feel your personal responsibility to society, and Walt Whitman ignored the failures of society and so did not impress upon one his personal responsibility to it. He struck off the fetters and left the danger which arises from undisciplined freedom.

The other day I attended a Walt Whitman meeting. A conservative happened by some great mischance to get in there—a delightful man. He said to the audience, "All of these single tax people, anarchists

and socialists are monopolizing Walt Whitman. You are putting him out of our reach. You are appropriating him as if he belonged to you." They began to hiss all over the house. That shows there is danger in misinterpreting Walt Whitman. Walt Whitman was magnificent; he is the body and soul of this movement, but when you strike off the fetters you allow the social system to spin lawlessly around.

When this century came in and Edwin Markham came forward he took up the social movement and particularized it. He began immediately to arraign society. At that time the labor unions were just forming, the Socialist party was just formed—or had been formed a little before that, but was just getting under way—and the question of labor and of the poor and of the defective, of toil without any hope, was in the air. It was in the air, but nobody had made it definite, nobody had crystallized it, and then suddenly appeared Edwin Markham's "The man with the hoe." The man with the hoe is not a man with a hoe at all: he is the man in the sweatshop, he is the stoker down in the bowels of the ocean liner; he is the man in the coal mine; he is the man anywhere that is working without privilege. He is the man working without the fruit of his toil; the man working without joy; the man working without hope, and the hoe is nothing but a symbol. Of course, Mr. Markham did not mean it for anything but a symbol, but at the same time it crystallized and spiritualized and brought the whole thing before us, and gave to society the social responsibility—what we call the social conscience, as against the social consciousness. There is a good deal of difference in the two.

Now, Mr. Markham had grown up in the West. He came up from the people, from the very simplest people. He was a shepherd boy. He used to stay out on the hills weeks at a time. He would roll up in his blanket after he had built a fire to keep off the wild animals at night. Then his mother sold her sheep ranches and bought a great cattle ranch. There were moun-

tains on the ranch; it extended over miles. Then Markham graduated to a pony and was a range rider, riding over these ranges for miles with buoyancy and joy. Markham's "The joy of the morning" and some of his other poems are filled with this spirit:

"I ride on the mountain tops, I ride;
I have found my life and am satisfied.
Onward I ride in the blowing oats,
Checking the field-lark's rippling notes—

Lightly I sweep

From steep to steep:

Over my head through the branches high
Come glimpses of a rushing sky;
The tall oats brush my horse's flanks;
Wild poppies crowd on the sunny banks;
A bee booms out of the scented grass;
A jay laughs with me as I pass."

The first books of poetry Edwin Markham ever owned were those for which he plowed a twenty-acre lot. He read Shelley, and Shelley made a democrat of him, and that was Markham's beginning. You can see that out of that background he could describe the kind of thing that "The man with the hoe" had to go through. After Markham wrote that poem a wave seemed to pass over American poetry—what we call the social wave. Immediately all the poets began thinking what they could do to interpret this new movement. Immediately romance went out in favor of the social need, and the time spirit became a catchword. One of the first social poems following Markham's work was Robert Haven Schauffler's "Scum o' the earth." I think Mr. Carr, of the Immigration Society is to follow me and he probably knows of this poem by Mr. Schauffler. We are all talking about Americanism now. A great many Americans are foreign-born. This poem puts the blame on America for not Americanizing them better. It says they come here by the thousands and millions and we meet them with contempt, we call them the "scum o' the earth," and out of that despised and rejected term Mr. Schauffler constructed this splendid poem. The poem takes up one type and then another; first a young Greek like a Hermes, from Socrates' land; then a young Italian from Dante's land, Caesar's

land, and Angelo's land, but he is only a "dago" and "scum o' the earth." Then he takes the Pole:

You Pole with the child on your knee,
What dower bring you to the land of the
free?
Hark! does she croon
That sad little tune
That Chopin once found on his Polish lea
And mounted in gold for you and for me?
Now a ragged young fiddler answers
In wild Czech melody
That Dvorak took whole from the dancers.
And the heavy faces bloom
In the wonderful Slavic way;
The little, dull eyes, the brows a-gloom,
Suddenly dawn like the day,
While, watching these folk and their
mystery,
I forgot that they're nothing worth;
That Bohemians, Slovaks, Croatians,
And men of all Slavic nations
Are "polacks"—and "scum o' the earth."

And so the poem goes on. He takes the Jew, and he is but a "Sheeney"; he takes them all and then shows how crude America is, how young America is, to despise the people that come from older civilization and bring our art to us, because our art comes chiefly from our foreign-born. The Jewish boys and young Slavs are coming up to do the great work in art.

The next typical poem I might mention is "The Broadway shop-girl." All women who work in the social movement, with the fallen girl, for instance, ought to read that poem. It does not simply classify the girl, and tabulate her, but it brings out the finer side of the girl. It is a beautiful poem; I might give you a little of it. I will take the vers libre movement for the latter half of what I wish to say, but this social movement underlies the other and the new poetry has grown out of and was secondary to this. Miss Branch, the author of "The Broadway shop-girl," is a New England girl but she looks like a Botticelli picture. She is a classical type, reserved in manner, and you never would think she could approach the shop-girl in so intimate

a way as to express what is in this poem.*

All through modern poetry, if I had time to take up one piece after another, you will find scores of these poems. The other day one of your New York librarians came to me and wished to make up a bibliography of the poetry of democracy. I told her I could cite her to a great many books along these lines, and I should be glad to name them now but I must take up imagism and the vers libre movement.

Imagism made its appearance in the spring of 1913. It came through Ezra Pound, and indirectly by way of Walt Whitman, because all the free verse, and unrhymed cadence emanated from Whitman. When Ezra Pound in *Harriet Monroe's* magazine published his first free verse called "Contemporania," he acknowledged his debt to Whitman by saying it was he who broke the new wood and now was the time for the carving. In Germany and France, and all over the old world the vers libre movement came from Walt Whitman but imagism came directly from Ezra Pound and he had gained the idea from T. E. Hulme, a young London poet. Ezra Pound picked it up very quickly, as he has a way of doing. Ezra's mind is a poetic ragbag, out of which he weaves a garment for himself. He has ranged from Provençal to Chinese, but his work has a great deal that is beautiful if not strictly original.

Some time after Ezra Pound had evolved imagism came Amy Lowell, who is now the head of it in this country. She is a brilliant woman, highly eccentric. The other day in the New York "Times" she said that James Russell Lowell was a "cultivated gentleman." No doubt James Russell Lowell's "Commemoration ode" will outlive anything she has yet done, although we will see what she may do. You know one of Miss Lowell's most celebrated poems is on a bathtub. The idea of imagism is to take the things that are absolutely at hand. It does not matter what they are; every theme is suitable for poetry—that is the primary law of the new cults. Everything is suitable for poetry; therefore she

*Miss Rittenhouse quoted the poem which is too long to be included here. It may be found in "The shoes that danced," by Anna Hempstead Branch (Houghton Mifflin).

starts out in the morning and first describes the bathtub. Now the old Romans, you remember, used to have a sea shell for a bathtub and you could imagine you were Venus coming up out of the sea, but you can't think that when you are in an American bathtub! It is impossible! So I personally draw the line at bathtubs and coffee pots—the next part of this poem describes the breakfast, with the coffee pot, the boiling of the eggs, and all of those things. This is hardly, to me, dignified poetry.

I do not object to poetry about the coffee pot or bathtub if one could do it beautifully enough—the bathtub is a symbol of democracy! But it is the only connecting link with democracy in the whole of imagism; it is the only one I have found. Imagism is exotic. It is the Japanese tonka; you know the Japanese write much of their poetry in the tonka, which is in five-line form. Imagist poems are frequently five or six lines built upon the scheme of the tonka, and they are in that sense like the Oriental or the Chinese poetry or like the Japanese print. The Japanese print may have one thing, balanced by some other slight thing in the corner. The imagist idea is to give the picture. You are to take the picture without comment—that means you are not to be introspective in imagism. You must not be introspective or subjective; in other words, the picture is a picture; if you read in imagism a subjective meaning you do what the imagist does not expect you to do. It is exquisite for an external picture.

In the "New imagist anthology," 1916, just out, there are poems on Arizona and New Mexico which are beautiful etchings: just what they purport to be, beautiful little pictures; and that is what imagism can do, and do splendidly, and so long as it confines itself to that, to some external picture, a beautiful little engraving or etching, with one or two details, it is beautiful, but it is not interpretative. In other words, it is not subjective. There is nothing in imagism that is not external, and that is their boast. Their word is externality, whereas the highest beauty is internality: there is no hidden spiritual meaning that

the poem is trying to interpret, and therefore to me imagism is sterile and exotic. In that sense it is undemocratic, for if it were democratic it would have the bigness of American life instead of a Japanese and Chinese element. But it is beautiful in the sense of something purely artistic and external. From the picturesque side I like it very much; I enjoy the imagist anthology. But after you have read it you cannot state which of the poems were written by one author and which by another. They sound alike. There is a certain colorless color about them—they are just about the same thing. They have the same form of doing things.

Doing away with rhyme is all right. The greatest poetry existed without rhyme: it is not necessary. You can also do away with formal rhythm. They substitute what they call "cadence," rhythm without a beat. Of course, you know the difference. The old poetry has stress; you beat it off in metrical intervals. This poetry is without a beat, but is supposed to have a cadence. Let me give you a little thing which is one of the most beautiful things they have done,—one of Amy Lowell's, and as I give it you will see that it is just as beautiful as if it had formal rhythm:

VENUS TRANSIENS

Tell me,
Was Venus more beautiful
Than you are,
When she topped
The crinkled waves,
Drifting shoreward
On her plaited shell?
Was Botticelli's vision
Fairer than mine;
And were the painted rosebuds
He tossed his lady,
Of better worth
Than the words I blow about you
To cover your too great loveliness
As with a gauze
Of misted silver?
For me,
You stand poised
In the blue and buoyant air,
Cinctured by bright winds,
Treading the sunlight.
And the waves which precede you
Ripple and stir
The sands at your feet.

Now, I don't know whether you get there the sense of rhythm, but it is in two or three words to a line—"Tell me—was Venus—more beautiful—than you are—when she topped—the crinkled waves—drifting shoreward—on her plaited shell." You see it does have a beat and a very lovely cadence. Miss Lowell is quite equal to that, and she does it frequently; it is because she was trained in the old forms, and she exhibits a sense of cadence—more than the other people who came into the movement later.

There are two men of great importance in the new poetry, Robert Frost and Edgar Lee Masters. I want to mention them before I close, because they are a vital part of the movement. Robert Frost is democratic to the core; he is American to the core, and the types Robert Frost writes of are strictly out of America. They are the New England types from the stony hill farms and their barren and unhappy lives give you a certain sense of sadness, but they are elemental, they are from the ground up. You know Robert Frost is a farmer; he had a little farm up in the New England hills, and had a very difficult time to keep the farm going. His farm was perpendicular; it simply rolled off the hill; it could roll, and roll, and roll until there was nothing left of it. He had only a little money in it; it was mortgaged, and he made up his mind he would pull out that little money while he could save his soul alive. He sold it and went to England. He coined his soul and his last dollar to bring out his book, and with this book he is buying back another farm! I don't know what he is thinking of, but I suppose he gets his local color up there. The new farm rolls just as the other one did. He is a beautiful character with the face of a Christ. He has a delicate little wife and several children, and the tenderness with which Robert Frost approaches life is just the opposite of the attitude of Edgar Lee Masters. Every woman in Robert Frost's work is a Madonna. There are only two or three respectable women in "The Spoon River Anthology," and one

of those is ninety years old! Edgar Lee Masters is obsessed by sex and the moment you take up the book you say, "Here is a man coarser than Rabelais." That is your superficial idea; when you read it more thoroughly you see it is a big, broad interpretation of life; but he sees life entirely through its negative phases. In one sense that is democratic; in another it is not. We have in the Middle West in all villages just such characters as these referred to in "Spoon River." Edgar Lee Masters' father is a criminal lawyer in Lewiston, Ill. He was brought up in that country and these are actual scenes from the criminal courts. Many of them are real types, and in that way they are vital and probably valuable. But in the end I think it comes to a very doubtful thing as to whether it is well to dig in graves to the extent that Edgar Lee Masters does, because if you are digging in graves you are pretty sure to find something that is ghoulish.

Perhaps the most beautiful thing in "Spoon River" is what he wrote about Lincoln's old sweetheart, Ann Rutledge. You remember Lincoln was about to be married to Ann Rutledge when she died, and her grave is so neglected that nobody knows about it. Edgar Lee Masters put these immortal words into her mouth:

ANN RUTLEDGE

"Out of me, unworthy and unknown
The vibrations of deathless music;
'With malice toward none, with charity
for all.'
Out of me the forgiveness of millions
toward millions
And the beneficent face of a nation
Shining with justice and truth.
I am Ann Rutledge who sleep beneath
these weeds,
Beloved in life of Abraham Lincoln,
Wedded to him, not through union
But through separation.
Bloom forever, O Republic
From the dust of my bosom!"

You see, that is a very beautiful thing. It is a beautiful thought, that out of the love of Lincoln for this girl came the forgiveness and charity, and all of the glorious things associated with Abraham Lincoln.

There are many high notes, many more poetic in the sense of color than that, but those high notes show that Edgar Lee Masters has a great future. He is a powerful man if he gets to seeing life whole. He sees life clearly as far as he sees it, but he does not see it whole as yet; his new book has a great deal of beauty in it. I think Robert Frost and Edgar Lee Masters are the most vital of any of the group. They do not write absolutely free verse,

and no doubt these new forms will assimilate with the old forms and modify them. An interesting book, lately out, called "The new world," by Witter Bynner, is written in an unconventional form with infrequent rhyme. And we will find that through Edgar Lee Masters and Robert Frost and all of these others there will be an assimilation; the new forms will modify the old forms and we shall have a certain freedom within the law.

MODERN DRAMA AS AN EXPRESSION OF DEMOCRACY

BY ROBERT GILBERT WELSH, *New York*

Shortly after Miss Plummer assigned to me this topic, "Modern drama as an expression of democracy," there came the disconcerting intelligence that the trouble with our American drama was precisely that,—too much democracy.

At least, so Winthrop Ames said at the dinner given to Miss Julia Marlowe and Edward H. Sothern on their recent and lamented retirement from the stage. You remember Winthrop Ames as the manager of our least democratic playhouses,—the New Theater that was, and the Little Theater that still is,—occasionally.

"I think we shall diagnose the trouble with our stage more accurately," Mr. Ames is reported to have said, "if we say that the average isn't as high as it ought to be. The good plays are so submerged and overwhelmed by a flood of inferior rubbish that they seem to have been lost in the shuffle. I believe that the average quality of good plays has declined for these four reasons: America is a democracy; we have free public schools; unexampled material prosperity; and labor unions.

"For these reasons those in America who have been called peasants abroad have advanced a stride in the social scale, increasing the middle class and quintupling the number of our theater-goers. A whole new section of the public has sufficient mental

advancement and spending money to become patrons of the drama."

According to Mr. Ames, all that this new great clientele wants is a "show," a simple, rapid, exciting story told in terms of action. They care nothing for such things as character delineation, psychological analysis or subtleties of dialogue—the things that make for dramatic literature.

They become the general public and the managers are forced to cater to them.

"The trouble with the drama now, and for several years past," continued Mr. Ames, "is that it is dominated by a great, new, eager, childlike, tasteless, honest, crude, general public. And as for blaming anyone for it—well, it is pretty poor fun blaming a great primal force like gravitation or democracy."

However Mr. Ames may feel about it, democracy is finding its expression more and more in our drama.

And why not, pray? Are we not a democracy?

The aim of modern drama should be to mirror every phase of life and embrace every strata of society, and if it achieves that aim it will indeed be a democratic art.

As it is, our theater is in a period of upheaval and change. There are shifting currents. All is unsettled.

Even in the midst of the many pieces